

Freshwater Wetlands

ISSUE

Wetlands are an environmental resource that the Federal government protects through the Clean Water Act. Tidal freshwater marshes are rare, as they are located only in the boundary between coastal and fresh waters. In Savannah, most of the tidal freshwater marshes have been lost over the years as development has occurred in the estuary. This has included both landside development and the upstream movement of salt waters, as the navigation channel allows further intrusion of tidal waters. The Savannah National Wildlife Refuge contains much of the remaining tidal freshwater wetlands that exist within the Savannah estuary. The occurrence of those wetlands within a National Wildlife Refuge, particularly one that was established for freshwater purposes, increases the value of those wetlands.

PROJECT ACTIONS

The Savannah Harbor Expansion Project is evaluating potential project impacts to wetlands. We expect an additional deepening of the navigation channel to result in further upstream movement of tidal waters. This would likely shift some wetland communities from ones based on freshwater species to others dominated by brackish or saltmarsh communities.

The Cooperating Agencies recognize that numerous changes have occurred in the estuary over time. In the Vision Statement developed by these agencies at the beginning of the study, they recognized that this project could not reverse all of those impacts or restore the estuary to a pre-development condition. The agencies did agree that the Project should *“If needed, recommend specific actions that should take place outside the context of the Expansion Project to improve the local environment and/or compensate for past harbor improvement projects. The report would identify the process and participants to accomplish those specific needed actions.”* Thus, the group agreed that ways to address cumulative impacts on wetlands should be identified in the study and, where feasible, described in the GRR for action outside the SH Expansion Project. In the Planning Guidance Memorandum issued in 2002, HQUSACE concurred in that approach. The PGM states *“It is recommended that the District not use this GRR as a vehicle to add ecosystem restoration to the existing authorization. Ecosystem restoration opportunities to address long-standing impacts of the existing project may be noted and discussed. Also, ecosystem restoration studies may be considered as spin off studies.”*

Savannah District attempted to address the cumulative effects of harbor development on wetlands through the Savannah River Estuary and Freshwater Wetlands Study. In 2004, the District conducted a Section 905(b) Study that identified a Federal interest in restoring

freshwater wetlands in the estuary, a cost effective means of restoring wetlands, and a non-Federal sponsor willing to participate in conducting a feasibility study to further evaluate these issues. GA DNR-EPD provided a letter of intent to serve as the sponsor of those studies. Their lack of funding has resulted in the feasibility studies not being initiated.

The SH Expansion Project will identify impacts to freshwater wetlands expected from implementation of the proposed alternatives. We will develop a mitigation plan that avoids, minimizes and compensates for those wetlands to the extent that is feasible. We have identified several options for reducing and compensating for such impacts. At present, we do not know either the extent of the impacts or what measures may prove most cost effective. However, our goal is to develop and recommend a cost effective plan that mitigates for the incremental effects on wetlands from the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project.